



City of Cambridge

Community Development Department

STOREFRONT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

GUIDELINES

I. INTRODUCTION

The City of Cambridge Community Development Department (CDD) established the Storefront Improvement Program to provide technical and financial assistance to property owners or retail tenants seeking to remove architectural barriers, renovate the commercial building façade and enhance exterior signage. The Program's objectives are to improve accessibility and physical appearance of retail establishments and enhance commercial districts.

The Program will provide a matching grant for the funding of well-designed improvements that will coordinate all the important features of the storefront into a more attractive image while creating an accessible entrance for the public. This may include removal of physical barriers, restoration of architectural details, better windows and doors, and well-proportioned signage and lighting. Past matching grants have ranged from \$2,500 to \$35,000 with **accessible design upgrades getting 90% reimbursement** based on scope of work and available funds. Grants vary each year so contact CDD for further information.

Applicants, are responsible for hiring licensed architects, contractors, and sign fabricators. A retail tenant is defined as a commercial establishment selling goods or services directly to members of the public for personal use and whose use is not solely for re-sale purposes (wholesale). Included in this definition are food and creative for-profit businesses.

Improvements made prior to a signed improvement contract will not be funded.

II. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

The following criteria must be met for participation in the Program:

1. Applicants must be property owners or commercial retail tenants whose storefronts face onto a Cambridge street;
2. Commercial retail tenants must offer goods or services that are open to the public;
3. Preference will be given to independent businesses not required by contractual arrangement to maintain standardized décor, architecture, signs or similar features;
4. Preference will be given to commercial retail tenants in a commercial district or corridor;
5. Tenants must have written approval from property owners to participate in program and must have a current lease that is at least for one year and has an option to renew;
6. Billboards on property, if applicable, must be permanently removed as part of the improvement;
7. Property owners must be up to date on all municipal taxes prior to participation in the program;
8. Applicants must comply with all State and local laws and regulations pertaining to licensing, permits, building code and zoning requirements.

The City of Cambridge reserves the right to apply additional criteria before accepting a project if program demand exceeds budgeted resources.

III. DESIGN PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES

Storefronts should be oriented to the pedestrian and facilitate access into the store; provide visual interest both day and night and create a store identity unique to Cambridge and/or the respective neighborhood. Improvements funded by the program must be compatible with the character and architecture of the individual building and, to the extent appropriate, with other nearby buildings. Buildings with significant architectural qualities are strongly encouraged to restore and maintain these features. Improvements for buildings not having notably historic or architectural features should be an opportunity to enhance the appearance of the building and their streetscapes.

A. Eligible Storefront Improvements

The following improvements are encouraged:

1. Accessible* parking spaces and path of travel on private property for retail use (i.e., signage, curb ramps, paving, sidewalks, etc.) * per M.G.L. c. 22, § 13A, of 521 CMR
2. Accessible* entrance into storefront (i.e. ramps, lifts, etc.) and accessible* doors (i.e., automatic door openers, ADA and Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (MAAB)-compliant hardware, etc.) * per M.G.L. c. 22, § 13A, of 521 CMR
3. Restoration of details in historically contributing or significant buildings, and removal of elements which cover architectural details;
4. Window display areas which are appropriately scaled and which facilitate night viewing, window replacement and window framing visible from the street which are appropriately scaled to the building;
5. Signage that is attractively integrated into the architecture of the building, including the window area, awnings or canopies, and entryways;
6. Lighting that is visually appealing and appropriately illuminates signage, storefront window displays, and recessed areas of a building façade;
7. Awnings or canopies that can be both functional and visually appealing;
8. Landscaping features attached to the building where appropriate, such as window boxes or planters;
9. New entrance and storefront construction, appropriately scaled within an existing building; and
10. Other approved items (i.e. painting, cleaning, repointing, etc.) necessary to achieve the overall improvement. Funding for temporary ramps that improve the accessibility of a retail commercial tenant will be considered on a case by case basis and the City of Cambridge reserves the right to apply additional criteria before funding is awarded.

For examples of barrier removal, please see “The Americans with Disabilities Act Checklist for Readily Achievable Barrier Removals” at www.ada.gov/rachecck.pdf and “ADA Guide for Small Businesses” at www.ada.gov/smbusgd.pdf. MAAB specifications can be found at www.mass.gov/law-library/521-cmr.

B. Prior Improvements

Alterations and improvements made prior to receiving a signed reimbursement contract or a “Notice to Proceed with Improvements” are not eligible for reimbursement.

C. Alterations

The applicant must agree not to change or alter the improved facade without prior written approval from CDD for five (5) years from the date of the rebate check issued under the Storefront Improvement Program.

IV. PROGRAM ASSISTANCE

A. Financial Assistance

Funding offered is a matching grant in which the City would reimburse the applicant ninety percent (90%) for accessible storefront improvements, up to \$20,000.00, and fifty percent (50%) for other improvements, up to \$15,000.00. Any projects requesting reimbursement for more than \$2,500 must have an accessible storefront. Architectural design fees may be included in the total cost of eligible improvements but cannot exceed \$5,000 of the total reimbursement. The Program will only reimburse applicants after the applicant has paid his/her contractor and vendor(s) in full and after the project is determined to have been completed in accordance with the contract between the City and applicant. Any work paid for or conducted prior to a signed contract or “Notice to Proceed with Improvements” will not be considered as eligible for reimbursement.

Grant levels are determined at the beginning of the fiscal year based on program funding and vary from year to year. Please contact Christina DiLisio at (617) 349-4601 or cdilisio@cambridgema.gov for information on available funds and reimbursement grant limits.

B. Application and Information

If you wish to participate in the Storefront Improvement Program, please contact CDD, (617) 349-4601 (voice) or 617-349-4621 (TTY). The City of Cambridge will provide auxiliary aids and services, written materials in alternative formats, and reasonable modifications in policies and procedures to persons with disabilities upon request.

PROCEDURES

All prospective applicants must follow the procedures in the order outlined below.

1. Applicant meets with Program staff for initial project discussion and files an application. Additional meetings with Program staff may be necessary to discuss building program and design alternatives, depending on proposed scope of work.
2. Applicant's architect prepares design drawings and submits them to Program staff for review and approval.
3. Upon approval of final designs by Program's Design Review Committee, the Applicant has thirty (30) days to solicit three written bids from the contractors necessary to

complete the improvement scope of work. **Bids from each contractor must be on contractor letterhead and itemized so that a cost is associated with each task or material to be installed.** (Copy the Program staff on all solicitations for bids.)

4. Upon approval of submitted bids by Program staff, the Applicant will enter into a contract for reimbursement with the City of Cambridge. The maximum funding amount indicated on the contract will be based upon the lowest bid for proposed improvement project and program grant limits.
5. A pre-construction meeting takes place between the Applicant, Program staff, selected contractor, and project architect.
6. Program staff sends applicant a “Notice to Proceed with Improvements” or signed contract. **Any work completed prior to receiving the “Notice to Proceed with Improvements” or signed contract will not be reimbursed.**
7. Applicant has thirty (30) days from the execution date of the contract to begin implementation of approved improvements. Applicant must provide Program staff with copies of all building permits and certifications received for improvement project.
8. Contractor constructs project improvements as specified in the final design. Any changes previously agreed upon and contracted must have prior approval of Program staff. It is up to the applicant to notify the Program of these changes in writing.
9. Applicant notifies the Program staff once project is completed.
10. Program staff and City staff certifies that the improvements comply with the final drawings and specifications, including relevant ADA codes and Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (MAAB) specifications.
11. The architect and/or contractor(s) must submit letters to the Program staff acknowledging full payment by the applicant. The applicant must submit to the CDD copies of all paid invoices and copies of cancelled checks or credit card statements;
12. Program staff submits invoices for City of Cambridge to issue rebate check.

The Storefront Improvement Program reserves the right to make adjustments regarding conditions and parameters outlined in these guidelines. City staff from the Commission for Persons with Disabilities may withhold funds in the event that accessibility upgrades are constructed incorrectly or not to code.

V. TERMINATION

The City of Cambridge has the right to terminate any agreement under the Storefront Improvement Program if a participant is found to be in violation of any conditions set forth in these guidelines or if the project has been started prior to an executed agreement with the City of Cambridge.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Visit the Cambridge Community Development Department website for information about additional business development resources:

www.cambridgema.gov/business

SMALL BUSINESS ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM

The Small Business Enhancement (SBE) Program reaches out to Cambridge retailers and restaurant owners seeking to improve their establishments' interior appearance, marketing, advertising, and operations through consultation and grant assistance. The City hires expert retail consultants to share best practices in the industry with participants. A business must meet eligibility requirements to participate in individual in-store consultations and the grant program. The Program's goal is to assist business owners with technical and financial assistance to build a stronger customer base and boost sales.

For more information on eligibility requirements for the SBE Program, please contact Pardis Saffari at 617/349-4654 or via email at psaffari@cambridgema.gov.

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS

The Economic Development Division works with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and local organizations to provide business development programs and services to Cambridge residents, entrepreneurs, and businesses. The Economic Development Division maintains a calendar of educational workshops on our website or contact Rona Abrahams at rabrahams@cambridgema.gov or 617/349-4637 for more information.

THE CAMBRIDGE ENERGY ALLIANCE

The Cambridge Energy Alliance is a city-sponsored nonprofit group created to save you money on utility bills and maintenance expenses, while reducing Cambridge's carbon footprint and creating jobs in the city. The innovative CEA program offers practical solutions that will lead to comprehensive results. For more information about the CEA, please visit the Cambridge Energy Alliance web site at <http://www.cambridgeenergyalliance.org>

INVESTMENT TAX CREDITS

Federal historic preservation tax incentives are available for any qualified project that the Secretary of the Interior designates as a certified rehabilitation of a certified historic structure.

The percentage of Investment Tax Credits (ITC) are 20% credit for rehabilitation of certified historic structures and a 10% credit for rehabilitations of other buildings first placed in service before 1936.

You may be eligible for ITC if your commercial or income producing property is listed individually, qualified to be listed, or is a contributing building within districts in the National Register of Historic Places.

To qualify for the tax incentives and prior to beginning work on the property, property owners must complete a Historic Preservation Certification Application available from Massachusetts Historical Commission. The Massachusetts Historical Commission will review your application and submit it to the National Parks Service. A detailed

description of the proposed rehabilitation work is part of the application. All rehab work must be done according to the Secretary of the Interiors Standard for Rehabilitation with Guidelines for Rehabilitation Historic Buildings. The underlying concern expressed in the Standards is the preservation of significant historic materials and features of a building in the process of rehabilitation. Certification is based on whether the overall project meets the Standards.

Upon completion of the rehabilitation the owner must submit a Request for Certification of Completed Work. A project does not become eligible for tax incentives until it is completed and designated by the National Parks Service.

For further information call the Massachusetts Historical Commission at (617) 727-8470.

DISABLED ACCESS TAX CREDIT

The 1990 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act created a federal income tax credit for small businesses to help offset the costs of modifying buildings in order to comply with the accessibility requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The credit will cover 50% of eligible cost that exceed \$250, but do not exceed \$10,250. An eligible small business is one whose gross receipts do not exceed \$1,000,000 or whose workforce does not consist of more than 30 full-time workers. Examples of eligible access expenditures include the necessary and reasonable cost of removing barriers, providing auxiliary aids, and acquiring or modifying equipment or devices.

The Internal Revenue Code also allows a deduction of up to \$15,000 per year for expenses associated with the removal of qualified architectural and transportation barriers.

For further information contact the Internal Revenue Service by visiting their website at www.IRS.gov or by calling (800) 829-4933. Additional information can be found by visiting the American with Disabilities Act website at www.ada.gov or calling the ADA Information Line at (800) 514-0301 or TTY (800) 514-0383.